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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8559
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 2004
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4211
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2190
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000034

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP, DRL AND IO;

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/19/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#) [SENV](#)

SUBJECT: CONSERVATION GROUP CREATES COMMUNITY FORESTS,
LIVELIHOODS

REF: 08 RANGOON 115

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Classified By: Pol Officer Chelsia Wheeler for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) implemented its third grant through Embassy Rangoon's small grants program to start a community forestry program in the Kyeintali area of Rakhine State, near the Yoma Elephant Sanctuary. During our December 2008 visit to monitor the project, we observed the group's success in organizing a replanting program in three village areas devastated by slash-and-burn agriculture, and in training farmers in sustainable agriculture and forestry methods. The environmental conditions we found in Kyeintali are not unique, but it is still somewhat rare, particularly in remote areas, to find local citizens taking concerted action to improve them. Our small grants program gives us an important tool to help change that situation. End Summary.

COUNTERING THREATS TO THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

2. (C) BANCA is a Burmese environmental organization, comprised of forest experts including scientists and former wardens. Over the past six months, it used an Embassy small grant to run a community forestry project in three villages near Kyeintali, an area of Rakhine State near the Yoma Elephant Sanctuary. The Kyeintali area, located only a few miles from the Rakhine coast on the Bay of Bengal, acts as an unofficial buffer zone for the sanctuary, a designated protected elephant habitat. Local contacts told us the human population in the area is increasing, and with it the rate of deforestation. Although there are environmental laws on the books, local enforcement is non-existent. Slash-and-burn cultivation and pesticide use cause erosion and destroy local fish populations. We observed firsthand the impact of slash-and-burn cultivation in the hills surrounding Kyeintali: large swathes of mountainside were charred from recent fires and other areas, although starting to regenerate, had no trees at all.

3. (SBU) The three villages that participated in BANCA's project are located within a four-hour drive and several mile

walk from the nearest metropolitan area and survive primarily on subsistence farming. (We got there by driving over four hours on a very bad road, riding a boat upstream for an hour, and then another hour walking through rice fields) . Villagers estimated an annual per capita income of USD 100. Only 20-30 percent of children who finish primary school attend the middle school in the town of Kyeintali, several miles on foot from the villages. Of the 41 community forestry members that we met during our December trip to the area, only five had passed high school exams and three of those were schoolteachers.

STAKEHOLDERS IN THE CAUSE

14. (C) BANCA has attempted to change local environmental attitudes and practices before deforestation becomes too severe to reverse. In cooperation with local NGO Rakhine Coastal Region Conservation Association, BANCA is currently working with the villagers near Kyeintali to create several community forests in the area. This involves organizing villagers to administer and maintain common forest lands jointly and lobbying the GOB for community forest certificates, which is essentially a 30-year lease from the government granted to the community as a whole with the promise that they will maintain the land for forest use rather than agriculture. With its Embassy small grant, BANCA purchased thousands of fruit and fuel wood seedlings and created a community tree nursery near the forests. Villagers have organized themselves to maintain fire breaks around the forests, tend and plant seedlings, and protect saplings. Villagers carry all seedlings to the forest on foot up a three-mile mountain slope. BANCA expects the forests to start yielding timber in 5-10 years. Careful

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maintenance of the forests will allow villages to harvest timber and fruit for years to come. In the meantime, villagers can use the forest land to plant vegetables such as tomatoes, chili, eggplants, and beans.

COMMENT

15. (C) BANCA used Embassy funds effectively to provide protection for a fragile ecosystem and improve the lives of people in the affected Rakhine communities. More importantly, the organization demonstrated that even in the remote areas of Rakhine State it is possible to bring people from disparate communities together to learn from and help one another. BANCA is one of approximately 50 civil society groups we have helped through the small grants program; the important role it plays is typical of the organizations that continue to seek our assistance.

DINGER